

# **ARTiculation: Engagement in Composition Courses Through Expressive Arts**

**Peaches Hash  
Appalachian State University**

*Composition courses are some of the most commonly required courses for undergraduate students, but students are often not engaged when completing assignments. Although scholarship supports alternative forms of composition such as arts-based methods, Expressive Arts has yet to be utilized as a curricular method. This article examines literature surrounding art-making with composition and showcases curricular methods used during a semester. The instructor's practitioner action research assesses the curriculum's success through narrative analysis of students; data. The study's results support art-making as a curricular tool that promotes engagement in the forms of increased growth mindset, individualized active learning, and intrinsic motivation.*

*Keywords: expressive arts, composition, higher education, practitioner action research*

## **INTRODUCTION**

When I found out I had been accepted to teach within a university English department as an adjunct, I was ecstatic. After seven collective years of teaching high school, I was exhausted from the curricular restrictions, testing requirements, and, most of all, student apathy. My days of students smiling blissfully with a shrug when I asked for their homework would be a distant memory, or so I thought. Little did I know that an increase in age did not automatically correlate to student engagement.

During the fall of 2017, I taught my first courses of Rhetoric and Composition 2001, the (traditionally) second-year writing course with a theme of Writing Across the Curriculum. "Sophomores! Even better," I thought to myself as I planned the syllabus with required readings, essay prompts, and in-class activities that I thought would be enjoyable: analyzing advertisements on YouTube, rhetorical debates, etc. My fantasized semester of second-year writing was filled with mature, engaged learners who pushed themselves to write. I could not wait to begin.

Fast forward to the end of the semester, and all I could think was, "What went wrong?" The apathy within my high school students was, to some degree, still present in many of my current university ones. Many had fixed mindsets (Dweck, 2006), thinking their writing skills could not increase significantly with practice, so why bother? Even the ones who acknowledged that they could improve were often unmotivated due to demands from other courses. Each class took so much effort for me to get them engaged enough to do much more than passively listen or write for a few minutes without attempting to text under their desks.

It was easy to believe that external factors were causing my classroom issues. My course was a General Education requirement, meaning students had to take it to graduate; consequently, many of them came in with poor attitudes on the first day that sometimes never dissipated. Or, perhaps it was the time of day. I taught morning classes where some of them were yawning throughout the activities. But in my heart, I

understood that the curriculum I had painstakingly planned before the semester was not effective. Sullivan (2014) states that an essential question teachers of writing must ask themselves is “[h]ow can composition instructors create classroom conditions within which students will motivate themselves?” (p. 126). When reflecting on that question, I determined that if the curriculum had elements of active, individualized learning, students would become more engaged, or self-motivated. But for this type of learning to occur, I needed to create a more learner-centered curriculum where students could construct their own knowledge instead of just listening to mine (Schiro, 2013).

My quest for this type of curriculum led to practitioner action research with arts-based methods. As I assigned art activities that paired with each paper sequence of drafts, students began to put forth more effort. After one semester using this curriculum with freshman composition, many of them signed up for one of my second-year sections because they wanted to create more art. Though I knew students liked making art in my composition courses, I did not understand why on a deeper level. The following article explores my findings during a semester of practitioner action research where students engaged in art-making within a second-year rhetoric and composition course. When students enjoy the curriculum within a course, they are more likely to put forth effort and personally connect to the material, which is what I sought to explore new methods within my courses to engage students. Narrative analysis is used to showcase individualized student experiences with art-making. Ultimately, arts-based methods in composition fostered active, individualized learning, growth mindsets, and enjoyment in student participants over a semester.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Composition and Engagement

The issue of student engagement within collegiate writing classes is common. Throughout education, many students do not enjoy writing, which leads to lack of engagement. When people enjoy activities, they are more likely to put forth time and effort into completing them (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). Compositionists identify several contributing factors to students’ lack of enjoyment. Writing in academia is often “a laborious and many times unrewarding process” (Fleckenstein, 2003, p. 39). The process can require a significant amount of time for an outcome that may be lower than a student expected. Assignments typically included in writing courses are cognitively demanding of students, requiring more than sentence construction and organizing paragraphs. Additionally, students are expected to showcase high levels of what Carroll (2002) calls critical literacy, requiring “researching, reading complex texts, understanding of key disciplinary concepts, and strategies for synthesizing, analyzing, and responding critically to new information, usually within a limited time frame” (p. 9). All of these expectations students must meet can make the composition process seem futile: Why put so much effort in when it is not enjoyable to do? Why try when there is no guarantee the efforts will be rewarded? As Fleckenstein (2003) expresses, “Writing hurts. Failure hurts” (p. 40). If students do not feel that they can avoid failure, they can at least attempt to avoid the added pain of a lengthy process.

Other curricular methods within composition classrooms contribute to students’ lack of effort. Professors in higher education commonly ascribe to a Scholar Academic ideology: Students must learn the knowledge accumulated from the instructor’s academic culture (Schiro, 2013). The curriculum is constructed, influenced, and molded by the instructor’s personal or professional interests, creating a “hierarchical community” (Schiro, 2013, p. 4) where the instructor holds the truth and the students are recipients of it. In her research, Carroll (2002) noticed that students are constantly involved in a process of figuring out what the professor wants, attempting to force their writing into these expectations. As a result of this structure, binaries (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016) develop between learner/instructor, skilled/unskilled students, and “good writers”/ “bad writers.” Binaries cause students to feel divorced from their writing if they struggle, preventing them from seeing themselves as writers at all even though they are expected to produce writing (Nolan, 2019). When instructors reply on solely teaching the rules of academic writing, the result is both indoctrinating and disempowering, making students ascribe to this rigid system of “good” writing, but also revealing to them how difficult it is to achieve, especially as undergraduates (Sirc, 2002). Even if students see ways to achieve these academic standards, they may not think themselves capable.

When course structures narrow individual expression and constructed knowledge, student writers feel as if their writing should be standard rather than individualized (Nolan, 2019). Additional aspects of the scholar academic ideology that contribute to student aversion in writing are evaluation and traditional assignments that narrow student creativity (Sullivan, 2014). If students do not feel that they can succeed under this model, they will not enjoy writing.

### **Art-Making and Composition**

Art-making is a curricular method that many compositionists in higher education (Dunnigan, 2019; Fleckenstein, 2003; LeCourt, 2004; Palmeri, 2012) consider as an effective way to engage students. They recognize that the process of creating visual products is another form of the composition process, but it allows for more openness in composition than the limits of written words alone. Allowing for alternate methods of composition prepares students for the increasingly visually communicative world they inhabit, opens opportunities for expression, and helps students articulate what might be difficult in academic language; consequently, current trends in composition include students exploring different modalities within the arts. Albers (2007), Dunn (2001), Dunnigan (2019), Hanzalik and Virgintino (2019), Palmeri (2012), and Shipka (2011) have all experimented with using arts-based methods in their courses in some capacity to facilitate the composition process and create more “intellectual pathways” (Dunn, 2001, p.1) for constructing knowledge; however, though they articulate the benefits of using alternative forms of discourse (Shipka, 2011), there is less research on how the art-making can enhance student engagement, motivation, and enjoyment over the entire course. I designed my study to contribute to this gap.

### **Imagination**

The arts are theorized to have unique benefits for learners that can enhance their experiences with writing, especially for sparking imagination. When interacting with visual arts in disciplinary experiences, Freedman (2003) states that imagination develops. According to Greene (1988) imagination is “fundamental” (p. 48) for engagement. But the term “imagination” lacks a clear definition. It seems to be an ideal aspect of curriculum and learning, yet elusive in how practitioners can achieve it in their classrooms. Egan (1988) explains that imagination is a desirable outcome of an educational experience, but that many practitioners are unsure what causes it, which is partially due to imagination being less synonymous with academic learning and more with unstructured thought. Curriculum theorists throughout history (Dewey 1934/2005; Eisner, 1972; Greene & Lincoln Center Institute, 2001; hooks, 1994) have recognized the power art-making has for sparking imagination, but they have fewer suggestions for curricular activities and more theoretical ideas of how imagination and art can function in education.

Imagination is an essential aspect of composition as well as art-making. Both practices require imagination to begin a process of creation. In terms of the writing process, imagination is often connected to brainstorming. After a lightbulb effect of an idea (imagination), the student is able to articulate it through writing. As with imagination in composition theory and education, the arts are traditionally used before composition begins, if at all. But Sharples (1999) explains that “there is no single starting point” (p. 6) to begin writing; it is up to the writer to determine where to begin. Likewise, art-making has multiple pathways for beginning. In art-making, there is often a flow of ideas as one experiments with materials. Idea flowing can also occur in writing, but it requires writers to be “fully engaged with the task” (p. 49). Writers from a range of skills and reception to written composition may have difficulty inducing this type of deep engagement, but art-making is a nontraditional method that can activate this engagement. Art-making can then transfer to written composition based on the curricular models in place. Imagination, or exploring possibilities, is essential for students to write, but it is not limited to a brainstorming, pre-writing process, which is when the arts typically occur in writing courses.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

### Constructivism

Art-making can facilitate the construction of knowledge based on experience. It contributes to the construction of reality for those interacting with them. Efland (2002) explains that throughout history, the function of the arts has been to construct reality. Visual arts are representations of worlds, whether they be realistic or interpretive. Dewey (1934/2005) explains that art-making can deepen the construction of reality because “to perceive, a beholder must *create* his own experience” (p. 56). While externally creating, the brain is internally creating as well. In terms of what is occurring within the brain, Malchiodi (2018) asserts that the arts are able to evoke different responses than what language and logic are able to do, as well as “expand the logic of the thinking brain to other possibilities and perceptions” (p. 72); thus, art-making can deepen and enhance previously constructed knowledge as well as provoke the formation of new knowledge. With these theories in mind, I began to consider how curriculum could be used to facilitate knowledge construction.

The practices of art-making and written composition share constructivist links. When creating visual arts, one’s process involves generating and selecting ideas to represent. Written language as well as art-making function to both stabilize and represent ideas (Berthoff, 1984). Though ideas may be in a state of continuous construction, art-making, as well as writing, records a moment of construction for students to return to. The selection of ideas can both frame one’s view and “captures the moment” (Eisner, 1972, p. 12). Once ideas are selected, they are constructed with art-making. Makers reflect, interpret, and consider how to put what is in their heads into a visual form. According to Eisner (2002), an artistic product is a “[r]epresentation [that] stabilizes the idea or image in a material and makes possible a dialogue with it” (Eisner, 2002, p. 6). Essentially, the dialogue is constructed knowledge, knowledge that is learned or unlearned, occurring before, during, or after a process of art-making. But the entire process of art-making is not just creating a product; it is also a form of meaning-making. Meanings form, develop, and restructure continuously during a period of art-making. With both writing and art-making, meanings are “created, found, formed, and reformed” (Berthoff, 1981, p. 71). Each meaning that is made, then, is constructed knowledge that may stabilize or reconstruct with new experiences.

### Poststructuralism

Though enjoyable for some, art-making in a subject area that is not an art course is unsettling for other students; it is not what they seem accustomed to. Students are typically prepared for what Sharples (1999) describes as external constraints: the paper prompt, pencil or other writing device, and paper. Students have relayed as much to me in all of the semesters I have used arts-based methods, curious as to why they are not writing daily in a writing class. But this unsettling of what is expected is also beneficial. Art-making creates imaginative contexts for learning that may mean “unsettling routines” (Egan & Judson, 2016, p. 111). Creating curriculum that is more inclusive makes spaces available for student meaning-making that might otherwise not exist. This type of curriculum calls for the unsettling of spaces that emphasize competition and traditional classroom dynamics. Asking students to begin a process of composition without having to write words disrupts the norms of the composition environment, where students assume they will be writing continuously as their form of communication. Sharples (1999) views this type of disruption as a liberating activity where students can explore the process of design more fully, seeing that it can occur outside of the external constraints they have come to view as comfortable: “Activities such as sketching and doodling are not distractions from the task of writing, but an integral part of it” (p. 10). Through art-making, students’ ideas of composition and communication are challenged to develop further than they might not otherwise.

Unsettling routines within curriculum can also bring about pleasure in the classroom, resulting in excitement for learning. hooks (1994) understands that many students come to college used to learning through a banking system where memorization and absorption of facts are rewarded over critical thinking. Her solution is that educators “disrupt the atmosphere” (p. 7) by attempting to bring pleasure in the classroom. Art-making lacks the enforced seriousness that students often relate to written composition,

allowing them to play. As students share their art with their peers, they also come to know one another, which is another way hooks (1994) sees excitement being generated within the classroom, “hearing one another’s voices, in recognizing one another’s presence” (p. 8). In order to execute this type of environment, there needs to be flexible agendas and “spontaneous [shifts] in direction” (p. 7), which aligns with aspects of arts-based educational research (ABER): flexibility, willingness to follow exploratory threads of meaning, and participant self-expression.

## **METHODOLOGY AND METHODS**

### **Expressive Arts Framework**

Though other compositionists and educational theorists have explored the connections between art-making and composition, there is less research on how expressive arts can enhance students’ experiences. I had a feeling that art-making would enhance my courses because I experienced it firsthand as a student when I had the opportunity to work within the framework of expressive arts (EXA). While completing my doctorate degree in Educational Leadership, I was also taking classes in expressive arts to complete the graduate certificate. During my courses, I began to notice how much EXA aligned with what I wished to create in my courses. Though EXA is more common in therapeutic professions, it can also be utilized by educators. What makes EXA different from art-making in a traditional studio setting is that it places importance on the process of art-making rather than a final product (Knill, 2005; Knill & Knill, 2017). Neither teachers nor students have to have any artistic skill as long as they engage fully in a process of making, putting forth effort and focusing on how their thoughts construct meaning. A curriculum based on expressive arts, then, allows for low skill/ high sensitivity (Knill, 2005; Knill & Knill, 2017). It is based on the ancient Greek word *poiesis*, “the act of bringing something new into the world” (Levine, 2017b, p. 10), with the “something new” being knowledge/understanding instead of a highly skilled artistic product. Through this construction, or composition process, art becomes a way of knowing (Allen, 1995).

Individual ways of knowing for learners contribute to the exploration of multiplicity in their creative processes. Knowledge/information is continuously being constructed or reconstructed as new experiences continue, making learning active/ongoing rather than passive and positivist, or what hooks (1994) would describe as banked knowledge. Though content knowledge is taught, it is not an ultimate, irrefutable truth, and students are encouraged to take what they have always known and push further into the unknown (Levine, 2017a). This type of exploration for knowledge is “decentering,” requiring students to move away from positivism, of “‘dead-end’ situations” to follow the circular “logic of imagination” (Knill, 2005, p. 83). Within EXA, art-making is a way of knowing that is individualized and respected by peers and the instructor. Though these concepts may seem radical or daunting, hooks (1994) sees individualized learning as something that students crave: “Students are eager to break through the barriers of knowing. They are willing to surrender to the wonder of re-learning and learning ways of knowing that go against the grain” (p. 44). Expressive arts, then, seemed like an appropriate curricular method for giving students what they desire.

### **Curricular Re-Design**

The first step of bringing expressive arts activities into my courses required me to revise my curriculum. Research conducted by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) explains that the amount of writing assignments within a course is not as important as the types of writing assignments instructors give their students (Bean, 2011). Engagement and deep thinking are not automatic; the assignments must promote them. In their “Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing,” the Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project (2011) outlined habits of mind to approach learning that would challenge and help students develop their skills:

- Curiosity: The desire to learn
- Openness: The willingness to alternative ways of thinking and being
- Engagement: Investment and involvement in one’s learning

- Creativity: Novel methods for exploring and constructing knowledge
- Persistence: Sustaining effort and attention
- Responsibility: Taking ownership for one's learning
- Flexibility: Adapting to change
- Metacognition: Reflecting on one's process and constructed knowledge.

With these aspects in mind, I sought to create a curriculum under Schiro's (2013) Learner Centered ideology, with students constructing meaning, engaging in activities, and actively participating in creation over the semester. When designing the curriculum, I desired it to facilitate the following aspects that would align with the aforementioned habits of mind:

- **Individualized Active Learning:** Simmons and Hicks (2006) explain that creative art-making can "enable people to trust their inner intelligence and imagination and enhance opportunities for learning" (p. 80). I wanted students to gain confidence in their own composition abilities instead of worrying how I would assess them. The curriculum emphasized process creativity rather than product creativity, looking at how their art-making problem-solved, explored, or questioned within their environments instead of their final art products being original, useful, or valuable to the outside world (Kellogg, 1994).

Oxtoby (2018) identifies an aspect of active learning as an activity that allows students to work with metaphors to help understand course concepts. Expressive arts asks participants to explore metaphors through art-making; thus, including them could stimulate an active environment.

- **Growth/Innovator Mindset:** A simple, but effective way to view students' beliefs in their composition abilities is through Dweck's (2006) conception of fixed versus growth mindsets. A fixed mindset stems from the one's belief that their knowledge and skills will not develop regardless of the amount of time they put into learning. If students feel that they are just not writers or will never write well, they have a fixed mindset towards the subject. In contrast, if they believe that their skills can develop with resources and practice, they have a growth mindset. Dweck (2006) attests that skills are not innately present; they must be developed, but a fixed mindset prevents students from doing so. Sieben (2018) states that mindset theory should be an important consideration in curriculum development for writing courses. In her own research, she found that growth mindsets significantly correlated with what she called writing hope, or the positive belief that they have agency in achieving their writing goals in a course.

Expanding on Dweck's (2006) mindset theory, Couros (2015) explains the need for growth mindsets to extend to innovation in this ever-changing world students inhabit where they prepare for jobs that may not exist yet. He defines the innovator's mindset as "the belief that the abilities, intelligence, and talents are developed so that they lead to the creation of new and better ideas" (Couros, 2015, p. 31). To foster an innovator's mindset, educators must create a curriculum that allows students to recognize that failure is part of the process of learning, which will then enhance their resilience and grit. Curriculum should also tap into students' passions while also promoting risk-taking, problem-solving, creating, reflecting, and construction of knowledge (Couros, 2015). All of these aspects put students within an educational culture of "yes," where they feel that their ideas matter and they feel empowered to pursue them.

- **Intrinsic Motivation:** My students seemed motivated to write because of external factors, such as the grade, my perception of them, etc. The result was that there seemed to be a disconnect between themselves and their writing: They only wanted to do it to get it done, not engage with the process based on their topic. Sullivan (2014) suggests creating assignments that motivate students intrinsically. Through surveying students on what they enjoyed, valued, and learned in writing courses, Sullivan (2014) found that students are more intrinsically motivated to complete creative assignments and different mediums for composition.

My department's course structure for Rhetoric and Composition classes typically allowed for three major writing assignments with several drafts throughout a semester. Though we have choice in the types of assignments, I followed a standard narrative, analysis, and research-intensive structure within the

semester. The new component was to assign an expressive art project to accompany each paper sequence. Though students would not be graded on the artistic product, they would earn credit for the thought and reflection they put into the making. The art would be due with their first draft for peer workshop, allowing for students to share their art as well as the writing with their peers. Table 1 reflects the prompt for the art/writing.

**TABLE 1  
COURSE ASSIGNMENTS**

<b>Paper Assignment</b>	<b>Art/Writing Prompt</b>	<b>Reflective Activities After Completion of Art/Draft</b>
Literacy Narrative	Create a hierarchical form that reflects how you achieved literacy in a topic of your choice and write an accompanying narrative that helps your audience understand your art.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Class gallery walks on the due date of the art/draft.</li> <li>• Peer writing groups sharing of art processes/products.</li> <li>• Peer workshop of written component.</li> <li>• Journal reflection on their art-making/writing processes.</li> </ul>
Rhetorical Aesthetic Response	Create a multimodal form that reflects how a text rhetorically persuades you in different ways and write an accompanying narrative that helps readers understand your art.	
Discourse in the Major Research Assignment	Create an artistic form that takes your audience through your journey of research, and write an accompanying document that helps your audience understand your research process.	

**Data Collection**

The reflective journals provided a gateway into how students felt about the artistic aspects of the curriculum, but I sought more feedback into what students were experiencing than their short responses provided; consequently, I decided to engage in practitioner action research to explore the effects of the curriculum. This research involved interviewing student participants in my courses four times a semester: Once after each art project, and the final time at the end of the semester. The interviews were semi-structured, asking students open-ended questions such as how they felt about the assignment, then questions on how they thought the art-making related to their writing process. Table 2 includes the research questions used for the study.

Once the data within student participants’ journals and interviews was collected, I began to analyze it. Because I was utilizing arts-based curricular methods, this practitioner action research also fell into arts-based educational research, which does not require structured coding. Instead, I selected a less structured, open-ended method of mapping data by frequency of themes throughout the semester (McKernan, 1991). For each participant, I recorded all of their statements regarding their mindsets, perceptions, and feelings after each assignment, then reviewed if their statements changed over the course of the semester.

**TABLE 2**  
**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

After each individual project	At the end of the semester
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you explain your art to me?</li> <li>• How did the art-making connect to your writing?</li> <li>• How have your feelings about art/writing changed or remained the same?</li> <li>• What thoughts or discoveries emerged during this process?</li> <li>• Do you think the art-making was beneficial for this assignment?</li> <li>• What aspects of the art-making did you like or dislike?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What art-making assignments that have stood out to you this semester?</li> <li>• What moments stood out this semester during the art-making?</li> <li>• What thoughts, ideas, or discoveries did you have while making any of the art this year? (About self, topics, etc.)</li> <li>• Do you think the art contributed to your development as a student?</li> <li>• How has the art influenced your writing process this semester?</li> <li>• How have your opinions of art-making and writing changed or remained the same this semester?</li> <li>• Some students might state that the art assignments have no relation to the skills we cover in a writing class. How would you respond?</li> <li>• What would you recommend or warn a friend about the art-making?</li> <li>• Some students might say that these assignments are a lot of mental effort. How would you respond to that?</li> <li>• What, if any, connection exists between the art you created and your writing development?</li> </ul>

Throughout this process, I found the aspects of active/individualized learning, growth/innovator mindset, and intrinsic motivation that I considered when making the curriculum connected to participants' responses. The following sections are descriptions of participants' responses blended with my observations as their course instructor and their own statements from interviews/journals. For this article, I worked with data of students who exhibited fixed mindsets and less enthusiasm towards the course/college in general at the beginning of the semester. By the time I selected participants, I had read multiple homework assignments that asked students to reflect on themselves as writers, which helped with participant selection. Students selected their own pseudonyms, and visual data of their art projects is included to showcase ranges of student ability levels and choices of materials. Though I could have grouped data by themes, I elected to leave it divided by each participant to showcase their individual narratives throughout the semester. Separating and grouping would have taken away from their voices and experiences, as I would have tried to make them fit into a formulaic structure.

## **NARRATIVE ANALYSIS**

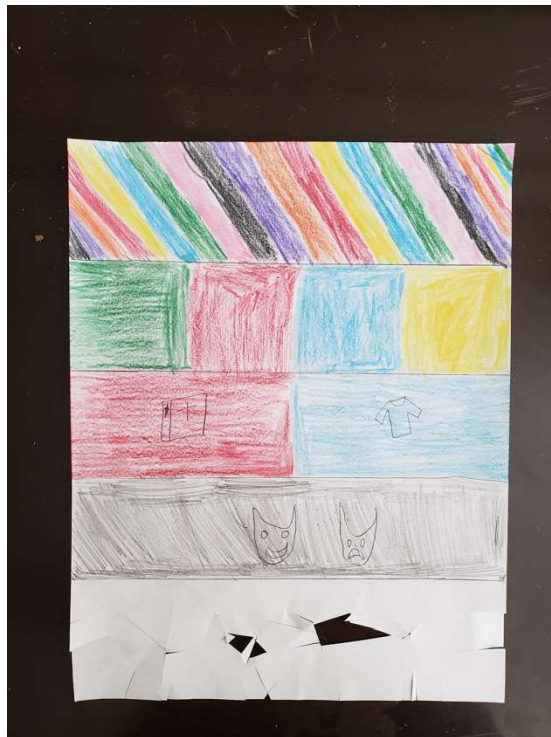
### **Figuring Out the Puzzle: From Concern to Growth**

I have seen many students in my courses like Pippin, who come into my courses comfortable with the writing abilities they already have. Often, these students have poor attitudes and wish to put forth minimal effort. Pippin's mindset and attitude did not change after the first assignment; it was a gradual process throughout the semester where he began to explore different artistic methods, forms of composition, and, consequently, ways of finding what he referred to as "balance." To be successful in the course, he had to challenge his understanding of writing and find new methods for representing his ideas.



Pippin was initially interested in the arts-based elements of the course because he thought it meant he would have “less papers to write.” As he considered what arts-based elements would entail, however, he began to feel anxiety at the thought of having to draw. Still, he elected to remain in the course after discovering that it was arts-based. “I trust in my ability to write and to tell a story,” he said confidently at the beginning of the semester, reflecting his fixed mindset that his writing would not develop further. In the past, he had succeeded in writing classes with minimal effort, understanding how to write a “standard essay.” The apprehension, he explained, was due to his perceived lack of “ability to adjust” to the new method, or his ability to grow.

**FIGURE 1**  
**PIPPIN’S FIRST ART PROJECT**



Pippin struggled with these concepts of adaptability and growth throughout the semester. He felt “shackled” by the expectations to create unique pieces that actually connected to his life. “I struggle really heavily with trying to find that balance,” he explained. To him, the assignments were calling for a balance of creativity and logic, which were “opposite sides” of his brain. He wrestled with what he described as an “overpowering” urge to compose in the standard academic way he was used to versus complete creativity while disregarding the prompt. But through his struggles, he was actively learning as he composed, playing in tangible ways with ideas and methods to discover what worked. Though he was not yet intrinsically motivated, he was actively learning through individual ways of meaning-making.

He did become more intrinsically motivated with each assignment, eventually spending over three hours composing his final project. He told me that by the end of the semester, he was no longer thinking of my feedback, but was instead considering his own “high sense of critique.” “I’m a super harsh critic on myself [ . . . ], so that also translates to art,” Pippin remarked when reflecting on the work he put into his third project. His third project was the most developed in terms of his process and final product. It was his only 3D piece throughout the semester, and he noted that he spent far more time on the construction/composition processes than he had for the others.

**FIGURE 2**  
**PIPPIN'S THIRD ART PROJECT**



Pippin also ended the semester with a change in mindset. At the beginning of the semester, he thought he could identify all of his strengths and weaknesses as a writer. He did not perceive the course as necessary to his education, nor something that would enhance his writing skills. His interviews and journal reflections were filled with “I can do this. I can do that. I can't do that.” When I brought this pattern up to him in his final interview, he replied, “I suppose, in the same way that a puzzle isn't challenging as much as it is something you have to figure out.” He saw that what he was being asked to do all semester, which initially gave him so much frustration and struggle, was not actually difficult. Instead, Pippin just needed to shift his mindset: Once he saw the assignments as something he could figure out, or grow in, he could “solve” them.

#### **A “Big Risk”: From Lack of Enjoyment to Excitement and Hours of Effort**

I have also had many students like Charlie in my courses: Students who are willing to complete assignments to receive a grade, but wish to put forth as little effort as possible. Charlie's transformation began so early in the semester that I was surprised when he told me that he typically was not motivated in his other classes. The expressive arts activities were different for him; they allowed him to pursue his interests, which, in turn, motivated him to spend hours on the assignments and become excited in the composition processes.

Charlie began the semester feeling relatively neutral to writing. He was willing to do it for a grade, but he did not “look forward” to it. Though he did not mind terribly writing for school, he did not enjoy it because he rarely got the opportunity to write “genuinely.” Charlie did not view his writing as something that could develop significantly, moreover, he did not care to develop it. His first project of art and writing

caused him stress because the results were unknown. He described picking an idea and going for it as “a big risk,” but he decided to “go for it.” He admitted that he did not spend much time in the composition of the assignment, but did spend more time exploring and selecting an idea than he did for his other courses.

**FIGURE 3**  
**CHARLIE’S FIRST ART PROJECT**



By his second project, something was changing in Charlie. Surprisingly to both myself and him, he spent around seven hours generating ideas, creating the art, and composing the writing. Though he admitted to taking little breaks, he said that he was “energized” to keep going. He said that the writing aspect took around two hours, longer than the time he would normally devote to writing, but the project caused a shift in his process. “It was like a two-hour period where I was just completely into it and I was just like, ‘Okay, I’m doing this.’ And I didn’t think I’d be able to do that,” he told me excitedly. Charlie’s reflections were aligning with aspects of active learning, individualized learning, growth mindset, and intrinsic motivation. When asked what facilitated the difference, Charlie explained that he typically “had a mindset of fake school work,” where he looked at assignments as tasks he needed to complete to get a good grade, but he never felt “honest” when he did them. In contrast, the second project made him “[give] that up” and decide “to just be honest with it,” exploring his individual interests and connections during his composition process.

Charlie’s increased effort continued throughout the semester. His third project took around four or five hours. When I remarked on the length of time, he explained, “I put all my effort into it ‘cause I like it.” In our final interview, Charlie identified ways the projects facilitated growth within the semester, including creativity, maturity, and what he described as “honesty” in his work. Honesty, he reflected, was something he had never had the opportunity to showcase before in his courses. He was willing and motivated to engage in active learning and connect with the assignments. When faced with a challenge in composing that made him frustrated, Charlie saw it as a learning experience and an opportunity for growth, whereas he would be annoyed if he had to put forth more effort if this scenario occurred in another course. His perception of his abilities also developed. Charlie noticed that each project made him think, “Wow I can actually do this kind of stuff and it comes kinda naturally,” seeing that he had the ability to grow all along, but he did not realize it. The projects also improved his “creative abilities” and problem-solving, enhancing his innovator’s mindset. His creative abilities improved and he “knew what more to expect” in terms of the process of composition: generating ideas, problem-solving, constructing meaning, etc. Overall, each project made him think, “Wow, I feel motivated” in a way that had not happened before.

**FIGURE 4**  
**CHARLIE'S THIRD ART PROJECT**



By the end of the semester, Charlie admitted that he did not enjoy writing before the course, but the art-making made him “excited” to do the work. He was able to see his growth in abilities and was curious what he would learn with each new assignment: “I saw how I was learning throughout the semester and was excited to see what was gonna happen next 'cause I knew it was gonna be unexpected, and it was.” He also told me that he did not enjoy college and typically put forth minimal effort into everything he could, but the course was a welcome change. “It's better to think about our assignments than mindlessly read a book and answer a question,” he stated. The types of active and individualized learning provided within the arts-based curriculum facilitated growth/innovator’s mindsets and intrinsic motivation within Charlie.

#### **A Student Who “Tries More”: From Considering Dropping the Course to Advocating for Challenging Assignments**

Alex and I were both surprised by her inclusion in my research study. I was surprised she desired to be a part of it since she openly did not enjoy writing, and she was surprised that I selected her for the same reasoning. But using students for this study who already liked writing and art would not do what I wanted: I sought to showcase how expressive arts assignments could enrich experiences for students who typically did not put forth as much effort. Alex had multiple periods over the semester where she became frustrated, telling me that my work made her “brain hurt” and explaining that she just was not creative. But by the end of the semester, Alex was advocating for arts-based curriculum. She saw that she was capable of producing interesting, entertaining texts if she believed that she could; moreover, Alex began to view the assignments as fun and no longer wished for traditional standard assignments that would restrict her creativity.

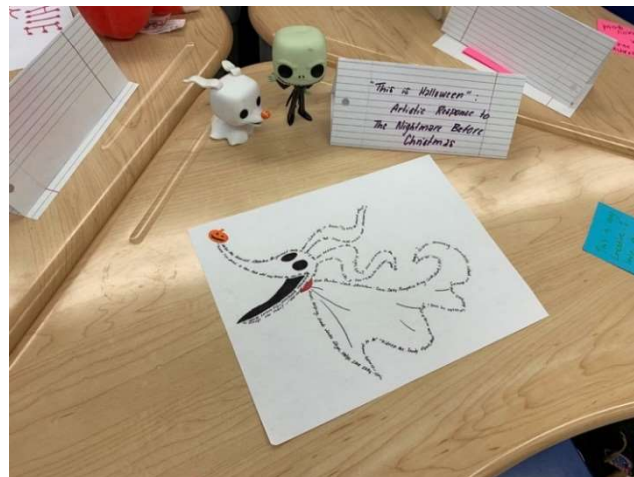
Alex considered dropping my course when she learned it was arts-based. “I was a little worried 'cause I kind of liked to try to be artsy, but I'm not [ . . . ] I looked to see if other classes would fit my schedule and they didn't,” she disclosed. Alex described herself at the beginning of the semester uncreative with a dislike for writing. “I have never liked writing. Writing is not on my thing,” she explained. With her fixed mindset of being a nonwriter and uncreative, one would think Alex would dislike the course throughout the semester, but after the first project, she admitted that she enjoyed it a mild amount. The art-making, to her surprise, added “something else” that made the writing “not as bad.” She appreciated that she could actively create with her hands in a different way than writing, and also thought that the art-making made the composition process more individualized because the prompts were so “open.”

**FIGURE 5**  
**ALEX'S FIRST ART PROJECT**



Alex did not enjoy the second project due to frustration with coming up with an idea. To her, the prompt was challenging her fixed notions of rhetorical analysis, calling it to be individualized and personal. Interestingly, her writing portion of the second project was the strongest writing skill-wise. She also noticed that once she began, it was easier for her to think creatively.

**FIGURE 6**  
**ALEX'S SECOND ART PROJECT**



By her last project, Alex saw that the assignments made her "brain hurt" because they shifted her mindset. "Yes, you made my brain hurt," she stated in our final interview:

I would have to be like, 'I don't... I... I... No...' [. . .] I'd be like, 'I don't know how to write this paper because I have to be creative, and I'm not creative' [. . .] So, I definitely...I have had to think more about different assignments in your class.

These statements indicate that though challenging, Alex was actively thinking about the assignments: how to creatively problem-solve, how to compose, etc. This reflection also alludes to how her motivation

shifted to intrinsic. In this course, she said that she “felt like a student that tries more.” In other classes, she would “get through” the work, but never put forth “maximum effort.” In this class, the art “required” that self-directed effort within her, making her willing to rise to the challenge. The third project, which required art-making and engagement with research, was one of the more complex assignments, but Alex appreciated the challenge. “I mean, it might have made my brain hurt, and I didn't enjoy that part of it, but it was like after I got done with it, I was like, ‘Alright this is kind of fun to do a research paper in a different format because I've done so many normal research papers,’” she said, recalling that it was “fun” to “change it up” with the composition process. She even compared the assignment to her “easier” freshman level writing course. It’s more fun, she exclaimed after her third project was completed, “In my RC class last year, I didn't have to think about it as much, but I hated it.” Though it required more effort, Alex preferred active, individualized learning.

Alex identified a shift towards growth mindset by the end of the semester as well. When comparing the arts-based creative methods to the ease of writing a familiar, standard essay, Alex reflected, “I can write out a five-paragraph essay in a good 45 minutes. Like, I've gotten that down pat [. . .] So, when you said no, I was like, ‘Crap. I'm actually gonna have to think about this, and word things differently.’ So, I was a little nervous, but then I was also kind of like, ‘Alright, let's see what happens. Maybe I'll like this writing style better.’ And I do like it better, because I feel like it's not as boring and nonchalant and just ‘bleh.’” Alex was describing an activity that would take far less time and effort for her as boring, whereas the creative activities that made her “brain hurt” were intriguing to her, opening her up to new ways of composing that she may never have explored due to her initial dislike of writing. She referred to her change in mindset to a “journey” that led her to realize, “This wasn't as hard as I thought.” Interestingly, Alex became an advocate for arts-based curriculum in collegiate writing courses by the end of the semester. She noted that the art-making facilitated construction of knowledge, the use of rhetorical concepts, and *deeper* understanding: “We actually develop our concepts through the art. It's not like we're just playing around [. . .] We're using our concepts and we're developing them through the art. And it's allowing us to add a new level to what we're doing.” Once she became open to the process, Alex was able to understand why it had a place within the curriculum. She was both surprised and pleased with the shift in mindset from the beginning of the semester. “During the process, it really wasn't that hard,” she realized, “It just takes the process of thinking creatively. And as long as you start to get into that mindset, you're good. It's that initial step of stepping into the creative aspect and really starting that journey.” That initial step that she describes is her openness to growth, innovation, and active/individualized learning that would lead to intrinsic motivation; she was learning for the benefits the art-making provided for *herself*.

### **Thinking Outside the Box: From Comfortable and Proficient to Embracing Creativity**

Students who took AP courses in high school often have trouble adapting to my arts-based curriculum. They are used to a certain style of writing that can be produced within a certain time frame almost automatically, regardless of topic. Fletcher was one of these students, which caused her to have anxiety when she heard about my course structure. My assignments asked her to step out of her comfort zone and she was not sure if she wanted to. Her transformation during the semester involved letting go of the restrictions she placed on herself and embracing the unknown. As the semester progressed, Fletcher became more excited to explore and play with ideas, realizing that she was capable of growth.

Fletcher too considered dropping my course when she found out it was arts-based. She said she was nervous and intimidated, but wanted to push herself out of her comfort zone. As a student who had taken AP English courses in high school, she felt both “comfortable” and “proficient” with her writing skills as they were, not expecting them to develop much further in a general education writing course. Though she did not have a fixed mindset towards writing in general, she was fixed in her belief that she was only proficient in one type of writing: a standard academic essay like the ones she wrote for AP classes. For the first project, Fletcher noted that her process was different. It made her “think outside of the box” and unsettled her from her typical format of getting an assignment, “crunching it out,” and “calling it a day.” “I had to really kind of think about this one and force the creative part of my brain to light up and get used,” she explained. This project required active learning within her that she noted had gone unused for some

time. When I asked her to expand more on the word “force,” which typically has negative connotations, she elaborated, comparing the process to a “challenging exercise” that might be difficult in the moment, but then be enjoyable. “Wow, this is dope. I did this, and I feel great,” Fletcher stated when describing how she felt by the end of the process, recognizing that she had experienced a shift in mindset, seeing that she was capable of growth and innovation that she originally did not think possible.

**FIGURE 7**  
**FLETCHER’S FIRST ART PROJECT**

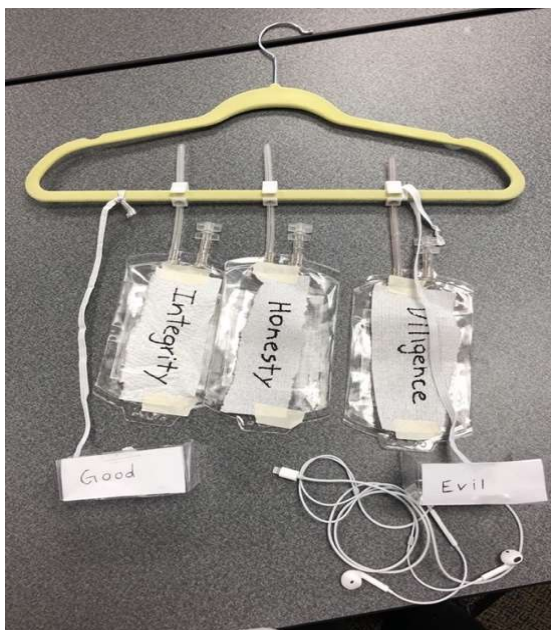


The second project took her around four hours and evoked nervousness once again. Fletcher was still influenced by her fixed mindset of not being creative, which led to difficulty in selecting an idea. Fletcher did not expect this type of confusion because she had always felt “comfortable” with rhetoric from her AP training, but this curriculum asked her to actively learn it. “In an artistic sense I was like, ‘I have no idea how I'm gonna convey rhetoric in a physical manifestation.’ I was like, ‘I really have no idea,’” she explained. Still though, like her first project, she was engaged in the composition, describing the process as getting in “the zone” and surprisingly enjoying it. She was also learning to trust this process of knowledge construction through art due to the appreciation of how her creativity was developing. To my shock, by the second project, this student who originally wanted to drop my course because of the curriculum was beginning to advocate for it: “I think if kids are just allowed to do art in an environment where they're not pressured and terrified of not producing some high-quality product, if they're just given the reins, I think they can actually produce some pretty cool stuff. You just have to not be so scared that it's not gonna turn out the way you want.” By the end of the semester, Fletcher would take her own advice.

The projects’ active learning and individual learning components began to transfer into Fletcher’s daily life. Instead of sitting down to work on the projects, as she would for other classes, Fletcher would look around the places she was and wonder, “Could I use that? Well maybe that? Look at this.” She was getting excited to construct and “play” with her ideas. Unlike her former fixed mindset of her writing process, she began to approach composition as exploratory. “And I just plugged in my music and I was like, ‘I'm just gonna get it all out and then see where it goes,’” she expressed while reflecting on her third project, which took her four to five days to complete. Each time, her process was increasing because she was intrinsically motivated. Instead of thinking about the grade I would give her, Fletcher was composing to please herself. For the third project, her thoughts included, “I need to switch it up and... It might look kinda goofy but...I was like, ‘I just wanna kinda do something kinda crazy.’” Her art was not the only area of the project that transformed, however. For her third project, Fletcher wrote a poem, something that she had never tried before. When I asked what changed, she stated that she was “so sick of writing essays” that were in “MLA English,” her term for structured academic writing. She was “scared” to write it, but felt “relief” when she finished. Rather than writing something that was “so long,” “repetitive,” and “boring,” she created

something where she saw “more room for error,” but also more ways of expressing herself through active, individualized learning. She was thinking in metaphors, using them to connect her thoughts and explore them deeper.

**FIGURE 8**  
**FLECTER’S THIRD ART PROJECT**



By the end of the semester, Fletcher understood that the curriculum called for a different type of student than she was typically successful in being: passive and less motivated. “Even last year’s RC1000, high school English, middle school... I didn’t do shit. I posted, it was a breeze, I gave them the little ‘la-di-da’ five paragraph, bingo, got 100. No sweat. With your class, you were like, ‘I’m not taking that.’ And I was like, ‘Now I actually have to put in some work,’” she explained during our final interview. Though she experienced frustration during her composition processes at times, she also saw that the projects were “more rewarding.” “There’s parts of me in it. It’s personal, I care about it. It’s not some carbon copy that I’ve been doing for 100 years,” she expressed, connecting to the individualized learning she experienced. She saw the curriculum as a method for creating exploratory, comfortable spaces for students who, in turn, became more motivated to compose.

Fletcher’s mindset definitely shifted from fixed to growth/innovator’s by the end of the semester. When considering her growth, Fletcher explained, “A demon’s on your shoulder saying, ‘There’s no way you can do it, it’s gonna be trash.’ And it was like, ‘You know what? I’m gonna try to prove it wrong, I’m gonna try to go out on a limb and not be some weenie and try,’ and I’m really proud of what I did.” The demon was her own fixed mindset, or perceptions of her abilities. After completing three arts-based composition projects, Fletcher recognized, “I like it a lot. It’s definitely more challenging, but I think anyone can do it, regardless of artistic background or not.” Once she moved past the restrictions and expectations she constructed within her own mind, she saw that she was fully capable of both art-making and interesting, personal writing. At the beginning of the semester, she saw herself as close-minded, but the projects made her both “less intimidated” and “more open to playing” with ideas. Ultimately, she saw that the art projects made her desire to “just try new stuff” in both writing and art, embracing discomfort and newness. “If you fail, so what? Who cares?” Fletcher confidently stated in her last interview, which we both agreed was not coming from the same mindset of a passive, less engaged learner she had initially been.



## CONCLUSION

This study found that curriculum that uses arts-based methods can foster growth/innovator's mindset, individual/active learning, and intrinsic motivation within students. Through the individual participants, it was clear that those who thought their writing skills would not develop, in fact, did so because the art-making helped their mindsets shift. Students who typically put forth minimal effort in their work were spending hours not only completing assignments, but enjoying the processes of making. The assignments sparked imagination, construction of knowledge about composition, and enthusiasm that was previously lacking in my courses. Students were pursuing individualized interests through active learning, motivating themselves to put forth effort, and finding that they were capable of growth.

### Limitations

There were limitations to these findings. I used voluntary participants from my courses, which means some student voices were not included. By holding dual roles as researcher and teacher, students could have been influenced to respond in certain ways. Additionally, though I included participant data from multiple courses, this study spanned one semester.

Practitioner action research is a continuous cycle of testing curriculum's effectiveness, revising it based on data, and trying it again in the future. I have yet to see if these findings continue as I teach new sections of my courses, but by writing this article, I hope other instructors will consider utilizing some of these approaches in their own courses. If so, this study of practitioner action research will keep cycling out into other classrooms, with other students becoming more engaged through art-making.

### Practitioner's Mindset

When I first began teaching collegiate composition courses, I felt like a failure due to their apathy and lack of engagement. "Perhaps, I am not meant for this," I thought to myself, searching for reasons to leave instead of confronting my issue: My curriculum simply was not engaging, which meant my students, as well as myself, were not enjoying it. But once I shifted my mindset from the fixed outlook that I could never improve, I discovered the thematic element of expressive arts that could facilitate growth in myself as well as my students.

Now, I cannot imagine teaching composition without this expressive arts theme. I cannot envision coming to a sterile room with twenty-three blank faces awaiting me to dump knowledge into them, instead of twenty-three (give or take; this is not a perfect solution) students excitedly carrying their projects into class, already admiring their group members' and asking questions. Knowing that this is the fifth semester using this curriculum in some capacity, I cannot fathom how many students would have never gotten to where I hoped they would be in composition processes without this curriculum. Art-making has transformed my curriculum and students.

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